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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: (ii) Women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly

Statement submitted by Mothers' Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2003/1.

** The document was submitted late to the conference services without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, by which the Assembly decided that, if a report is submitted late, the reason should be included in a footnote to the document.

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Introduction

The Mothers' Union is an Anglican voluntary organization promoting the well-being of families throughout the world. Our 1 million members, the majority of whom are women, are actively engaged in a variety of initiatives within their own communities. In particular, our Family Life and Literacy and Development programmes allow for a dynamic process of cradle-to-grave empowerment of women by women. Empowerment is an essential tool for eliminating violence against women by enabling them to create and build social capital.

Violence against women

Violence against women is a violation of fundamental human rights and prevents women from achieving equality in every aspect of their lives. It permeates all social strata of every society and all stages of the life cycle. Violence against women means "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life".[1]

Women's violent experiences include child abuse, female circumcision, rape as a weapon of war, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, marital rape and dowry-related violence. Violence can be perpetrated within the family home, the workplace and the community or by the State. It is an expression of the unequal gender relationships that result in the domination and continued subordination of women, thereby denying women advancement and participation in society.

Guiding principles

The elimination of violence cannot be fully achieved without the holistic empowerment of women in social, personal, economic and political spheres. Women must be proactive in advancing change for themselves and ending the cycle of violence.

Strategies and initiatives must target women to address the gender imbalance, but should not be exclusive of men, the necessary allies for change. Governments must move beyond a welfare approach to adopt a transformative approach that tackles the underlying causes that allow violence against women to breed and prevail in society. Governments must ensure a multi-agency, culturally appropriate educational approach in the action they take.

Recommendations

- **Custom and culture**

Excuses for violence against women include religion, tradition and culture, and historic notions of the proper roles of men and women, i.e., male entitlement and superiority. These must cease to be used as a defence and justification of gender-

[1] As defined in para. 113 of the Beijing Platform for Action (see *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II).

based violence. Even where culture itself grants men substantial control over female behaviour, abusive men often exceed that "norm".

It is imperative that Governments:

- Educate, enact and implement laws that change the attitudes of both men and women towards their respective roles and status
- Establish and extend programmes for men and boys that will change attitudes and patterns of abusive and violent behaviour
- Work with traditional and religious leaders to raise awareness of, and reduce violence against women
- Bring communities to understand that cultural values are not to be confused with cultural practices, and that practices can be changed without adversely affecting values
- Support grass-roots based initiatives that work within communities to dispel myths and discourage dangerous customs
- Ensure that the role of women in society is valued and affirmed

- **Health**

It is beneficial to society in every aspect, including child-rearing, education and the economy, to have a healthy female population. The Mothers' Union subscribes to a holistic approach to health care, including the employment of primary prevention strategies as well as welfare policies for survivors of violence. The emotional and psychological, as well as physical, effects suffered by women and girls as a result of violence are devastating — it is imperative that provision be made for both their mental health and physical needs.

Governments must:

- Prioritize awareness campaigns and actively promote the right of women to have good basic health care
- Ensure that women have access to basic needs, such as shelter away from violence
- Enable women to make their own choices with regard to sexual and reproductive health
- Protect women's health by liberating them from violence in all its forms, including female circumcision, which often results in severe infection and death
- Ensure that women receive the best palliative care, counselling, support, advice and information about welfare services

- **Education**

Women make up two thirds of illiterate persons in the world, which significantly impairs their bargaining power within the family and local community. Education builds confidence and esteem and must be used as a tool for teaching women leadership skills, life skills and to give them training so that they can be

enabled to cultivate their own advancement and mobilize change in the private, public and political arenas.

A society free from gender-based violence cannot be realized unless Governments:

- Intensify their efforts to achieve the millennium development goal of removing gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005
- Set up specialized programmes to meet the needs of older women with the help of NGOs
- Through education, dismiss myths and change the attitudes of both boys and girls about gender equality, relationships, violence (sexual), health and stereotypical roles of men and women

- **Poverty**

Impoverished living conditions create an environment that fosters conflict and where men are more likely to vent anger on their partners. Women in poverty are more vulnerable to abuse, forced prostitution and trafficking.

Governments must adopt a dual approach to the issue of poverty as it affects women; considered in,

(a) Inability to exercise human development as characterized in terms of the expansion of valuable human capabilities — achieving knowledge, longevity and a decent standard of living;[2] and

(b) Lack of access to resources, including through income deprivation, denial of paid work outside the family home and unequal access to health-care facilities, which denies women the opportunity to effect change for themselves.

Governments have a duty to:

- Relieve poverty
- Pursue debt cancellation for the developing world
- Focus on increased health care, education, income and employment for women, providing them with the opportunity to survive independently of men

In households where women have increased access to resources and income, violence is less prevalent and the cycle of poverty is less likely to be continued.

- **Representation**

Women are extensively underrepresented in positions of power and decision-making. They need equal civil, legal and political rights in order to draw attention to their needs, affect the political agenda and demand appropriate public action. Governments must ensure that women are enabled to participate in grass-roots initiatives, government committees and decision-making processes at the local, national and international levels. Research shows that the absence of all women working groups is a significant factor in the frequency of violence.[3]

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[2] UNDP, *Human Development Report 2000*, "Human rights and human development".

[3] World Health Organization *World Report on Violence and Health*, 2002.

How families and communities act is governed by prevailing ideas about sexuality and the status of women. National and international legislation set standards for the norms and limits of behaviour. Legislation against gender-based violence affirms that such acts will not be tolerated in society and dispels the idea that it is a private family matter. Women must be given uninhibited access to, and information about, the legal system. Successful legal reform must be accompanied by campaigns to inform men and women of their legal and human rights and boundaries.

Governments must:

- Create effective structures, instruments and resources to enact and enforce such laws
- Ensure that perpetrators are punished
- Provide training, resources and funding for personnel of the criminal justice system
- Compile statistics that (a) portray an accurate picture of the frequency and forms of violence against women, and (b) reveal the effectiveness of laws in preventing and punishing perpetrators of violence
- Assess the effectiveness of their measures in order to make progress

- **HIV and AIDS**

HIV and AIDS are a feminized pandemic. They accompany all of the above factors, are spread by them and generate them in their turn. In any attempt to eliminate all forms of violence, Governments must tackle HIV and AIDS. The UNFPA "State of the world population 2002" report cites family planning and population assistance as the best means to achieve this end, in association with education initiatives. Funding of health care and education for women must be a priority for Governments as a method of prevention and welfare.

- **Conclusion**

In order to eliminate all forms of violence against women it is necessary for Governments to address every aspect of gender inequality. The Mothers' Union holds Governments to the obligations to which they are already committed. Using clear strategies, lines of responsibility and time schedules, Governments must make as a priority the achieving of the millennium development goals and the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.